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## Tempest in a Toilet Bowl

### Creator Kate Millett puts a lid on the art controversy that won't die

BY MICHAEL KIEFER

Kate Millett hadn't heard much about the uproar her artwork "The American Dream Goes to Pot" had caused in Phoenix. The piece shows an American flag stuffed into a toilet basin in a wooden cage.

Speaking by phone from her home in upstate New York, she chuckled to hear that elderly veterans had been picketing the Phoenix Art Museum because of it, and that they had repeatedly and ritualistically removed the U.S. flag from its toilet. She chuckled again to hear that the Phoenix City Council had tried to figure out ways to sell the museum or at least foreclose on its lease.

As for the censure her work and the exhibit it appears in, "Old Glory: The American Flag in Contemporary Art," had received from no lesser patriots than Bob Dole and Newt Gingrich, she quietly said, "I heard there was a mention of it on Good Morning, America, or something."

The exhibit runs until June 16. The show's subject matter has unleashed a letters-to-the-editor debate that seesaws between those who conjure up the memory of men and women who served in combat and those who would remind them that freedom of speech is one of the ideals they were fighting for.

Of course, the Millett work comes from a different point in time, when the United States was debating a more substantial controversy over the U.S. presence in Vietnam.

"The American Dream Goes to Pot" debuted during the "People's Flag Show" at Judson Memorial Church in New York City in November 1970. It was a "happening" staged to protest the conviction of a New York art gallery owner named Stephen Radich.

In 1966 and 1967, Radich's gallery had exhibited several pieces of sculpture made of American flags by an artist and ex-marine named Marc Morrell. A police officer walking a beat noticed the sculpture and arrested Radich. Radich was subsequently convicted under a New York State statute forbidding flag desecration.

Hundreds of artists turned out for the Judson show in Radich's support.

There were dances and films, all featuring American flags. Yippie leader Abbie Hoffman wore the American-flag shirt that had gotten him arrested at a meeting of the U.S. House Committee on Un-American Activities and electronically censored from the The Merv Griffin Show on television. Never mind that Roy Rogers and Dale Evans had worn similar shirts on TV just weeks before without being censored.

"We were expressing our solidarity with our fellow artist," Millett remembers, "and our right to use the flag as a sort of symbolic language of our dislike of the policy of the war in Vietnam. We felt that the flag is not a magic object, you know. It was a piece of cloth and a symbol of the country, but it had been degraded by the policy of the war."

Millett's contribution to the flag show was really a revision of a larger, earlier work she'd displayed at Brooklyn Community College, a work she describes as "kind of a comment on the emptiness of city and apartment life, modern types and so forth. There was a bed in one cage, a table in another, a toilet in another. But for the Judson show, I added the sign and the flag."

The additions were not inconsequential. The artwork was arrested.  
"Actually, they didn't arrest the piece," Millett says. "They just photographed it and arrested the photograph."

Millett spent countless hours in court until Radich's conviction was overturned and her own case became moot.

Millett had burst on the scene in 1970. It was the year her doctoral dissertation became the best-selling book *Sexual Politics*, which one reviewer described as "a manifesto on the inequity of gender distinctions in Western Culture."

She was then catapulted into the front ranks of the Women's Movement; she had earlier been fired from a college professorship for her activism in the civil rights movement. Since then, she has written several books and continued to produce art. She lives on a Poughkeepsie, New York, farm that she converted into a women's art colony.

She does not hesitate to describe "The American Dream Goes to Pot" as a period piece.

"Perhaps what really wasn't understood is that this was a protest based against the war, and it comes from that time and that mood, so that you have to see it in a historical context," Millett says. "It probably isn't anything that would interest anybody to see today. It isn't a piece I would even do today at this particular moment, but at the time, we felt we were being censored."

The piece exhibited at the Phoenix Art Museum is not even the original, but a copy re-created from photographs for the show's debut at the Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art in 1994. The curator of the Cleveland show, David Rubin, has since become a curator for the Phoenix Art Museum.

"What they've done is they've built a reconstruction," Millett says. "They had a carpenter build it."

She has not even kept track of the piece; she knows it is now in Phoenix, but she was unaware that it had also been exhibited in Colorado Springs.

And she is surprised at the recent reaction it has garnered in Phoenix.

"I think it's too bad people have taken such offense," she says. "We were deliberately trying to be controversial, and we also were testing the law because we felt that it was dictatorial and superpatriotic and irrational. . . . We felt in protesting a dishonorable war that we were acting as patriots. And also we felt we were defending the First Amendment, which is free speech, and to us that was very precious and important."

The veterans protesting the work see themselves as patriots, too.

"I suspect it's a different feeling about patriotism," Millett says. "When we opposed the war, we felt we were doing it as patriots because we felt it was unjust and besmirched the honor of the United States. And so we both feel we're loyal and deeply moved by American values and the Constitution. But we see it differently."